

Channel Catfish on the Upper Mississippi River

*by John Pitlo
Bellevue Research Station
24143 Highway 52
Bellevue, IA 52031
(319) 872-4976
John.Pitlo@dnr.state.ia.us*

Channel Catfish populations in the Upper Mississippi River continue to show improvement and stability after a regulation change in 1985, which increased the legal length limit for commercially harvested catfish from 13 inches to 15 inches. Today, the commercial harvest is the highest since the 1960's. Catch of young-of-the-year channel catfish during 2003 was 1.2 fish/trawl haul, which was below the 18-year average of 3.0 fish/trawl. Although the catch of young-of-the-year was below average, higher catches in recent years are encouraging. Initially, it appeared as if there was a 4-year cycle with respect to strong year classes for channel catfish. In most pools, strong year classes were produced in 1987, 1991, and 1995; but the strong 1997 year class broke that pattern. However, above average production of young-of-the-year fish in 1999 fits the 4 year cycle started in 1987. The strongest year classes for the 1984-2003 period occurred in 1995, 1997, and 1999 and these fish are showing up in excellent numbers as 11-19 inch fish during the 2003 summer netting season. Catch in large mesh hoop nets during the summer of 2003, was the highest ever recorded for the 1984-2003 period at 15.8 fish/net. These fish will contribute to sport fish angling during the summer of 2004. Channel catfish continue to contribute significantly to the creel of sport anglers on the Mississippi River. During the summer surveys of anglers fishing Pools 11 and 13 from 1994-2003, channel catfish ranked second to fourth behind freshwater drum and bluegill as the most numerous species taken. The density of channel catfish in the Upper Mississippi River is the highest its been in 30 years and is expected to remain high due to the strong 1995, 1997, 1999, and 2002 year classes. The completion report will be finalized this year.